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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 002091

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SCUL](#) [VE](#)
SUBJECT: PRESS FREEDOM UPDATE

REF: A. CARACAS 02061
[1](#)B. CARACAS 01998

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Classified By: ACTING POLITICAL COUNSELOR DANIEL LAWTON
FOR REASON 1.4 (D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. The Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (BRV) continues to systematically harass independent media outlets and restrict freedom of expression. The BRV appears determined to find grounds to sanction opposition-oriented cable news network Globovision through a series of bizarre accusations. Separately, Canal-i, a newly inaugurated cable news network, was launched October 5 and claims to provide viewers with "balanced" reporting despite the owner's connections with the BRV. Meanwhile, a new set of local media outlets have become targets of suspicious break-ins and government-imposed closures. Media observation organizations once again criticized the government's record on press freedom during the year, particularly Radio Caracas Television's (RCTV's) closure. End Summary.

Globovision Under BRV Scrutiny

[1](#)2. (U) During his October 8 press conference, Minister of Interior and Justice Pedro Carreno announced plans to initiate a criminal investigation against all-news cable television network Globovision for airing video footage of a group of teenagers robbing unsuspecting drivers on a Caracas highway. Carreno harshly criticized Globovision for not reporting the robberies to transit authorities and questioned the authenticity of the footage. Carreno also alleged the video footage formed part of a "psychological campaign to generate fear among citizens."

[1](#)3. (U) General Director of Globovision Alberto Ravell dismissed Carreno's accusations and argued that the network's special report only sought to raise awareness about soaring crime rates in Caracas. Carreno dropped the charges after the network released a copy of the footage to the Scientific and Investigations Police Unit (CICPC), which deemed that the incident had not been staged. The media subsequently reported that authorities used Globovision's video to apprehend several of those caught on film.

[1](#)4. (U) Separately, Journalists for the Truth, a BRV-sponsored organization purporting to be a non-government organization, filed a claim September 21 with the Telecommunications Regulatory Agency (Conatel) against Globovision, accusing it

of violating the Media Law of Social Responsibility. The organization claimed that Globovision's September 17 coverage of a fight between opposition-oriented doctors and pro-Chavez staff at a local hospital "incited hatred and violence" and that the images were not appropriate for that particular time slot. Conatel has not responded to the claim.

"Balanced" News Network Airs

15. (U) Venezuela's newest cable television station Canal-i aired October 5. The all-news station claims to provide viewers with "balanced" news coverage and serve as an alternative to its closest competitor, Globovision. Canal-i is owned by Venezuelan businessman Wilmer Ruperti, one of PDVSA's major private contractors, who reportedly invested more than USD 21 million in the station. The network airs in Caracas, Maracaibo, and Barquisimeto and occupies the channels previously filled by Puma TV, a music television station. Canal-i was originally supposed to air February 28, but Conatel reportedly failed to grant them a broadcasting license in time. The station has since obtained a license through 2016.

16. (C) Canal-i's Marketing Manager met with Embassy Press Specialist recently and expressed interest in airing Voice of America programming. Press Specialist notes that although Ruperti is a Chavista loyalist, close to 70% of the network's journalists, administrators, and editorial staff identify with the opposition.

Regional Media Outlets Targeted

17. (U) The administrative offices of the regional daily

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newspaper "El Correo del Caroni" and broadcast media outlet TVGuayana were raided during the early morning hours on October 3 by unknown persons. The trespassers allegedly rummaged through accounting records and other files, but it is unknown whether any documents were taken.

18. (SBU) A judge in Bolivar state ordered the closure of the radio station Horizonte 88.5 and the confiscation of its technical equipment on October 3. The station's owner, Aquilino Marquez, alleges the closure is politically motivated and is due to his outspoken criticism of mayor Franklin Gonzalez, one of the nine mayors that faced recall elections October 7 (Ref. B). (Note: Gonzalez retained his public position. End Note.)

19. (U) A group of pro-opposition demonstrators marched to the headquarters of Panorama newspaper September 17 and threw bottles and rocks at the building's facade and verbally harassed journalists affiliated with Panorama, following the daily's coverage of the BRV's detention of Zulia's Chief of Security, Jose "Mazuco" Sanchez, in connection with the death of a Military Intelligence Police (DIM) official in a prison facility. (Note: Panorama is the highest circulation daily in Maracaibo, Zulia state and has a center-right editorial tendency. End Note.) According to statements by Panamora's Board of Directors, the National Guard and Municipal Police were called in to disburse protesters. The National College of Journalists and SIP condemned the attacks on Panorama and called on all sectors to respect freedom of the press, regardless of editorial tendency or political affiliation.

Media Watchdogs on Freedom of Expression

10. (SBU) The Inter-American Press Society (SIP) expressed concern about the state of the freedom of the press in

Venezuela during its 63rd General Assembly meeting in Miami from October 12-16. The SIP cited the BRV's closure of RCTV, its confiscation of RCTV's technical equipment, government harassment of independent journalists, and the government's arbitrary issuance of radio broadcast licenses to pro-government stations as troublesome. Additionally, the SIP noted that the Venezuelan president's proposed constitutional reforms further threaten freedom of expression. SIP officials also confirmed plans to hold their next meeting in Venezuela from March 28-31, 2008, despite the BRV's previous efforts to impede the conference from being held in-country.

¶11. (U) The International Association of Broadcasting (AIR) released a series of resolutions October 6 regarding press freedom in Venezuela. AIR called on the BRV to cease granting radio broadcast licenses to pro-government stations that have not gone through the proper registration channels, to respect the right to property by returning to RCTV the transmission equipment and towers Conatel confiscated in the wake of the station's closure, and the return of RCTV to public access airwaves.

Comment

¶12. (C) It is too soon to determine whether Canal-i will deliver on its promise to provide "balanced" reporting. Nevertheless, the network has made an initial effort to distance itself from most government-owned or affiliated stations by staffing well-known local reporters and offering news programs that are less politically polarized.

¶13. (C) Separately, the BRV and its sympathizers are keeping a close watch on Globovision in the hopes that the network will let down its guard and misstep, finally allowing the government to sanction it. Globovision, however, does not appear to be lowering its profile. Instead, it enjoys a privileged position as one of the few remaining critical voices on cable television, a platform that allows the network the ability to publicly challenge the steady stream of unfounded accusations against it. As noted in previous reporting, regional media haven't fared as well and remain subject to BRV harassment and closure.

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